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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 004354

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM BG

SUBJECT: KHASIA INDIGENOUS LAND ISSUES IN MOULVIBAZAAR

REF: DHAKA 3982

Classified By: Acting Pol/Econ Counselor David Renz, reasons 1.4(d)

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the wake of a recent attack on Khasia betel leaf crops, Khasia indigenous groups continue to try and resolve land claims with the government. Media reports may have exaggerated the scope of the attack. END SUMMARY

2. (SBU) On August 27-30, Poloff visited the Moulvibazaar district, located in northeast Bangladesh in the Sylhet division, to visit indigenous groups in relation to report of a recent attack and forced eviction of a Khasia village and to follow up on the deaths of six people in a bordering village which police claim were Indian insurgents (septel). Poloff also met with government officials, local BNP and AL leaders, and journalists in the area.

#### ATTACK ON KHASIA CROPS AUGUST 3

3. (SBU) Khasia leaders, Father Joseph Gomes, a Bengali priest involved in activism on behalf of indigenous groups, and Mahbub Morshed, a local Forestry Department official, each claim that Forestry officials and local Bengalis involved in the Forestry Department's "Social Forestry" project, destroying Khasia betel leaf crops on August 3. Khasia leaders recounted a group of 400-600 Bengalis and Forestry Officials who came with two elephants while Morshed said a group of about 30 with a few Forestry Officials destroyed the crops.

4. (SBU) Poloff went to the specific village that allegedly came under attack and did not see much evidence of crop destruction along the way. Leaders at the village were reluctant to show evidence of crop destruction saying it was further away and out of view. When asked about other problems, leaders, only mentioned the need for a road connecting their village to the main road (currently an hour plus hike up muddy paths from the main road). Contrary to press reports and previous statements from Father Gomes, none described any attack or forced eviction of Khasia villages (reftel).

5. (SBU) Khasia leaders filed a court case after police refused to accept their formal complaint about the attack. Khasia leaders did report, however, that police were concerned about the well-being of the Khasias and sent security forces the following day for their protection. There are currently 8-10 people accused of the incident and their case is pending in court.

#### KHASIAS STRUGGLING WITH BDG OVER UNRESOLVED LAND CLAIMS

6. (SBU) Father Joseph Gomes, provided background on land disputes between the Khasia and the government. According to Gomes, the Forest Department initiated two Eco Park projects in 1999 on land where the Khasia people have lived and farmed betel leaf, their livelihood source, for generations. One project was designed for 1,500 acres and the other for 800 acres. While the Khasia leaders have been able to delay the 1,500 acre project through their protests and activism, the 800 acre project is underway.

7. (SBU) Morshed, told us that Eco Parks are designed for "conservation management for the benefit of local people." The BDG says that it will use the Eco Park to preserve ecosystems, plant new types of trees, and build infrastructures for research and training. Khasia leaders claim, however, that there is plenty of other idle land in the area and only land which Khasias have traditionally lived and cultivated crops on has been targeted for Eco Park construction.

8. (SBU) The land claimed by the Khasia is mostly unregistered and thus officially under government ownership according to Morshed, Gomes, and Nawab Abu Abbas, former MP and whose family previously owned all the land in the surrounding area. While some Khasia leaders have titles to their land and claim to be paying land taxes, most do not have titles because they did not find the registration process necessary in the early 1950's when land registration began. Traditional nomadic customs and collective ownership traditions further complicate Khasia compliance with land registration policies. Forestry Official Morshed

acknowledged the need for a permanent solution so that the indigenous groups could have full legal rights to their land and the BDG can "better protect the forest."

19. (C) COMMENT: The land disputes between the Khasia and the BDG has been a long-standing problem. Some indigenous activists and politicians seem to be taking advantage of this protracted situation for their personal gain at the expense of the Khasia. There is reason to believe that the scope of the recent attack has been exaggerated. Viewed in this light, the attack on Khasia betel leaf crops can be read as an attempt by some to inflame this long-standing dispute for their own political gain. END COMMENT.  
CHAMMAS